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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Twelfth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 20th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Friday, 12 May 1995, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. CEAUSU

later: Mr. ALSTON

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GE.95-16534 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (continued)

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT

Suriname (continued) (E/1990/5/Add.20; E/C.12/1994/WP.14)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Mrs. Power-Staphorst and Mr. Vreedzaam (Suriname) resumed their places at the Committee table.

2. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname), replying to questions raised by the Committee at the previous meeting, said that international assistance to Suriname was primarily bilateral assistance from the Netherlands, and that since independence in 1975, Suriname had received 3 billion Netherlands guilders for its development programme. There were other credit lines available to it but, because of its high per capita income, very little United Nations assistance. The Government had not yet applied to the Lomé Mutual Aid and Loan Guaranty Fund, but it planned to diversify its sources and ask the Fund for help in constructing a main west-east coastal road.

3. Emigration had been a major factor since the 1970s. There had been a mass emigration of 90,000 - out of a total population of 400,000 - around the time of independence. Between 1950 and 1980, 130,000 - or 36 per cent of the population - had left the country. Between 1986 and 1992, because of the social and political unrest, about one half of the population of the eastern interior had emigrated to French Guyana or migrated to the capital of Suriname. After the peace accord with the insurrectionist movement, about 80 per cent of the refugees from French Guyana had returned, and their repatriation had been supervised under a programme jointly administered by Suriname, France and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which had provided housing, employment and social and educational programmes. Other refugees living in Panama were still awaiting repatriation while the Government rebuilt their homes destroyed in the war. Yet for the people of the interior of the country, especially in the areas of former conflict, educational and job opportunities were limited, and most were still moving to the capital - a major problem, especially during the current economic crisis when welfare funds were scarce. The Government was planning to deal with the internal migration within the structural adjustment programme, which had yet to be funded.

4. As to the structural adjustment programme and International Monetary Fund (IMF) conditionality, the programme was not, in fact, being implemented on IMF conditions because of the high social costs they would entail. The Government had not yet reached a final decision on the matter. Suriname's foreign debt was considered rather low. Exact figures would be given in the next report. Statistics showing the breakdown of bilateral and multilateral assistance would also be given in the next report. The Netherlands, the major source, had suspended assistance in 1983 for political reasons. It had subsequently reached an umbrella agreement with Suriname facilitating continued assistance, but the assistance was to be overseen by those monitoring IMF conditionality, which was in abeyance.

5. Smuggling, mainly of gasoline and food items, to neighbouring countries like Guyana and French Guyana did exist because of the low prices in Suriname. She believed, however, that the problem would be solved in the near future because the Government had recently rescinded its subsidies on gasoline, milk and transportation and introduced instead individual subsidies to those who could not otherwise afford such items.

6. She did not have figures on migrant workers in Suriname, but there were a number of them from Guyana and Haiti, employed mainly in the agricultural and the building sectors. Many were qualified technicians and could often earn a good living. The sugar industry no longer existed in her country; the Committee had therefore been given incorrect information about the exploitation of migrant workers in the sugar fields. The Government knew, in fact, of no cases of discrimination against migrant workers.

7. As to the comparison between civil-service and private-sector salaries, they were better in the private sector. There were too many civil servants, and many were leaving government service for white-collar jobs, which were prized in a developing economy based on services rather than production. The Government was planning to change the whole economic structure; but it was a huge undertaking, and it was intended to be part of the structural adjustment programme. Perhaps Suriname would be able to provide information on developments in the next report.

8. The types of complaints brought to the National Institution for Human Rights regarded the civil and political rights of individuals, not their economic, social and cultural rights. No woman had ever filed on the grounds of inequality with men. Her delegation was not clear about which additional facts about women the Committee would like to have.

9. Mrs. JIMENEZ BUTRAGUEÑO said that she was interested in knowing if there was any de jure discrimination against women, in fields such as family rights, employment and the like. Generally, more specific information should be given on the de facto status of women in the various areas of activity.

10. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) said that there was generally no legal discrimination against women in Suriname. But in actual fact they found themselves at a disadvantage in several areas - such as power-sharing and decision-making, or access to economic structures and the production process. In employment, there was equality in theory, but in practice women did not hold high-level jobs or positions of leadership. More women were poor than men; there was violence against women in the family. Suriname had prepared figures on the status of women for its report to the forthcoming Fourth International Conference on Women, and could include those statistics in its second report to the Committee.

11. Mr. ADEKUOYE asked whether women in Suriname had the right to separate bank accounts and to joint accounts with their husbands.

12. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) said that the answer to both questions was yes. On the issue of trade unions, non-unionized workers were usually not protected because the right to strike was a right attributed to members of trade unions. The Government was, however, trying to safeguard their rights;

for instance, by seeing to it that non-unionized working women also received maternity leave. No collective agreement contained a no-strike clause, but the parties to any collective agreement, which was concluded for a specific period, were not supposed to break it by striking as long as the agreement was in force. Workers none the less maintained their right to strike in order to improve working conditions.

13. Unemployment in Suriname was structural in nature; the mass creation of jobs therefore related to the overall economic situation which, again, related to the structural adjustment programme.

14. There was no legislation regulating the minimum wage, and no wage-fixing machinery. Civil servants fixed wages through periodic agreements negotiated with the Government, through their trade unions. In the private sector, wages were fixed through collective labour agreements with employers. Non-unionized workers were not in a strong position. In 1992, 72 per cent of the 91,000 workers in the public and private sector belonged to trade unions, and 36 per cent were contributing members. Regarding the health workers in the interior allegedly excluded from belonging to a union, article 30 of the Constitution established that right and anyone denied it could file a complaint with the Labour Inspection Unit of the Ministry of Labour. She knew of no such complaint; the five Trade Union Federations in Suriname would surely have been aware of one and would have protested.

15. Regarding the health and safety of workers, the purpose of the 1947 Safety Act was to promote safety and hygiene in the workplace and reduce accidents and the incidence of occupational diseases. Nine regulations had been enacted under the Safety Act, for implementation by the Secretary of Labour, the Labour Inspection Unit, the appropriate district commissioner, and as far as mining was concerned, the Geological and Mining Division of the Ministry of Natural Resources. The Labour Inspection Unit made an annual investigation and reported annually on occupational safety.

16. Regarding social security coverage, she pointed out that there was a misprint in paragraph 53 of the report (E/1990/5/Add.20): the figures given for financial aid for the poor were 1990 figures, not 1970 figures. The amounts of the benefits listed were low in relation to the needs, because of hyperinflation. The Ministry of Social Affairs had therefore recently introduced a social safety net system, covering all those whose income was below Sf. 3,000 per month. She believed that 43,000 persons were currently eligible for the whole package of benefits, for which, however, she had no figures at the moment. Concerning the percentages of those covered by the entire social security system, she could give some statistics: 25 per cent were eligible for the medical care scheme; in 1994, 20,500 parents had benefited from the child allowance scheme, and 68 per cent of them had been women; in 1994, about 8,300 heads of household had been eligible for the financial support scheme, and that included mostly unemployed women and female heads of household and single persons; again in 1994, 5,500 families with a maximum income of Sf. 500 per month had applied - on behalf of 14,000 children - for the school requisites benefit.

17. The indigenous population of Suriname had the same rights to social security assistance as the rest of the population. However, because of the

high cost of transportation, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing had made special arrangements for its staff to travel to the interior to provide assistance for those inhabitants once every three months.

18. In response to issue No. 24 of the list of issues (E/C.12/1994/WP.14), relating to article 12, she said that 20 per cent of the Surinamese population was not covered by either the national health insurance programme or the social medical care scheme.

19. Referring to a question posed by Mrs. Bonoan-Dandan on malnutrition, she said there had been much debate on some reported cases of undernourishment. The problem had been due, in part, to the lack of information on nutrition. The Government, with the assistance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from the Netherlands, had taken certain measures to address the problem and the situation was under control. The NGOs had provided some nourishing food items and had conducted an information campaign targeting the mothers. The Government made no distinction whatsoever between the children receiving nutritional assistance.

20. In response to Mr. Texier's question on the rate of unemployment, she provided the following statistics to give the Committee an idea of the scope of the problem: in 1986 there were 74,527 persons employed and 81,232 in 1990. The number of unemployed persons in 1986 was 15,521 and 16,198 in 1990.

21. Mr. Texier had also asked about the freedom to form trade unions and possible restrictions imposed by the Government. She said the Government imposed no restrictions on the formation of trade unions and that all trade unions in Suriname worked independently. There were five trade union federations operating freely in the country. There were also no restrictions on civil servants with regard to the right to strike. They were organized in trade unions which were all grouped under one large trade union federation. In practice, several strikes involving civil servants had taken place, especially during the country's economic crisis. There had also been strikes in the private sector.

22. Turning to maternity leave provisions, she said that there was a group of women who had little or no maternity leave benefits because, as stated in paragraph 43 of the report, they were not covered by collective labour agreements. That group included mainly domestic and shop workers. Depending on the employer, that group of women received varying levels of maternity benefits, but there were some who had no maternity leave or even lost their jobs if they became pregnant. Women's organizations had been urging the Government to deal with the problem, in the absence of legislation to cover that group of women. The Ministry of Labour had formed an advisory committee which included representatives of various women's groups. The committee had advised the Government that general provisions for maternity leave should be made and that there was a need for legislation to cover all working women. It had also recommended that there should be paid maternity leave for a period of 14 weeks. There had been much discussion on the funding of the provisions in question and it had been suggested that a solidarity fund should be established for the Government to take a decision in the short term. The Ministry of Labour had not yet applied to the Government for a decision on the

matter but women's organizations were satisfied with the progress because their advice had been accepted. The Government was expected to implement the committee's recommendations.

23. In reporting on the progress made in the social security system, she said the Government had determined that in order to implement a comprehensive social security system, it would need funding and would have to implement the structural adjustment programme. She referred to Mr. Adekuoye's question on financial assistance which was dealt with in paragraph 80 of the report. She explained that in the table presented in that paragraph, the number "1" referred to one adult, "2" meant one adult and one child, "3" meant one adult and two children and "4" meant one adult and three children. She said a revised table, incorporating those changes, would be issued to the Committee.

24. In answering the question on damages paid to the inhabitants of the interior, she said that UNHCR had implemented a programme to provide housing, food and education to those persons. They had not claimed damages from the Government because it was not the Government which had been fighting them, and therefore no compensation had been granted. Her Government's second report to the Committee would give further details on the scope of the assistance granted to the population of the interior.

25. In responding to a question on violence against women raised by Mrs. Jimenez Butragueño, she said that, as Mr. Vreedzaam had reported, the problem was a new one and that various women's groups had been urging the Government to take action to address the problem. The NGOs had been active in that area; they had conducted research, provided counselling, and had established crisis centres for the victims. The Government had, for its part, established a commission to advise on legislation to protect women against violence. The commission had discussed the Inter-American Convention on Violence against Women and the Government would be advised on how to incorporate the Convention into national legislation. The commission had also discussed the general issue on how Surinamese legislation could protect women victims of violence.

26. The Committee had asked whether the number of street children and abandoned children had reached the levels registered in other parts of South America. She said the problem had not reached such high levels in Suriname. There were, however, some abandoned and street children and the Government, through the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, had been addressing the problem. Provisions for those children were not yet adequate. There had been negotiations with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing to provide accommodation for the children who had been removed from the streets. Her Government would report further on that matter in its second report.

27. Turning to Mrs. Bonoan-Dandan's question on the proportion of military expenditure in relation to the overall economy, she said she did not have specific figures, but that spending was primarily on education, rather than for military purposes.

28. Noting that the question of an underground economy had been raised, she said that while the emergence of an informal sector was noticeable, the Government had not conducted any research into that area.

29. One member had inquired whether there was unified legislation governing the concept of the family. She said there was such legislation applicable to the entire Surinamese population. Nevertheless, common-law arrangements existed and there were people in the interior who had their own family systems.

30. As stated in paragraph 85 of the report, the rationing system of consumer cards was still in effect. Under that system, every Surinamese was entitled to receive a card, but the Government was considering changing the system so that only the poorest members of the population would receive the basic food items they could not afford.

31. She recognized that the data on housing were outdated and that the waiting time for housing was rather long. The Government had not been able to build houses in the previous 10 years because of the economic crisis. Previously, the Government had administered an extended housing programme through which three-bedroom houses were provided for low-income earners. Some houses had been built through self-building projects but most houses had been built by the Government. Some of the persons who received houses paid a rent that was related to their income, approximately 7 per cent, and after a certain period, those tenants were entitled to buy the houses from the Government.

32. On the question of households headed by women on their own, she said that the incidence of such households was growing, as a result of the country's economic crisis: some men had left the interior for the capital to seek employment, leaving their families behind. The Government had dealt with the problem of such households in Paramaribo, but not yet in the interior.

33. With regard to the question of why homeless people were not registered, she said that no official statistics on the extent of homelessness existed to date. All homeless people in the capital were cared for by a church group which provided them with daily meals and clothes. The group claimed that it had adequate funds for the purpose and that if it needed government support it would ask for it.

34. With regard to the fact that many households had no running water despite Suriname's abundance of natural water resources, she said that the provision of running water constituted a big undertaking. The plans were fully worked out, but the funding was lacking, particularly for schemes in the interior, where kilometres of pipes would have to be laid, since the area was not densely populated. Bilateral assistance from the Netherlands was, however, to provide running water for a large number of families.

35. As to why there was a lack of participation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the housing sector, she was at a loss. NGOs were generally active in her country and indeed an NGO forum had recently been

established, employing full-time staff, to deal with NGO problems and programmes. The Government did not know why NGO activity did not extend to the housing sector.

36. With regard to an AIDS programme, she said that between 1983 and 1994 there had been 382 cases of HIV per year, of whom 39 per cent were women. Routine testing, however, was not carried out, so there was no information on the real prevalence of HIV. As for vaccination, 90 per cent of the population used to be covered, but Suriname had been unable to pay its dues to the Pan-American Health Organization - or to other United Nations agencies - for several years owing to the economic crisis and the shortage of foreign exchange. The Government intended to implement its structural programme in order to pay its outstanding dues. Similarly, anti-malaria cover had been good in the past, but in recent years anti-malaria teams had been unable to enter the areas where fighting was taking place. Six months earlier, however, the Government had launched a campaign to restore cover to previous levels.

37. With regard to armed groups, she said that they had been forced to surrender and to destroy their weapons in the presence of a delegation from the Organization of American States. Some armed individuals remained, mostly robbers in the interior. As for the implementation of the peace accord, she could not say that normality had yet been achieved in the interior, although efforts were being made. Again, the main difficulty was the lack of funding for construction.

38. Land rights represented a major problem, which was currently under discussion. The people who lived in the interior had always claimed rights over the land where they lived, but those claims had had no formal basis in law. The Government had, however, recognized, and was implementing, such claims as part of the peace process. A report would shortly be issued containing an inventory of the land in question and detailing the claims that had been made.

39. On the question of the situation of education in the interior, particularly as it affected refugees, she said that even before the internal struggle only primary education had been available, whereas secondary-school pupils had had to go to the capital. With the fighting, all education had come to a halt, but the Government was trying to reintroduce it. Schools were being rebuilt with help from the local people. Teachers - who had been fearful, owing to the fighting - were being encouraged to move into the interior through the incentive of special premiums and housing facilities. A fresh group of young teachers was being trained to serve in the interior.

40. According to the Moiwana '86 report, illiteracy was a "major problem"; according to official figures, however, which were based on a survey carried out in 1980, the problem was not so great: illiteracy extended to only 10 per cent of the population. In that context she noted that 8,000 people were participating in the literacy programme, not 80,000, as her colleague had stated earlier. She conceded that those living in the interior - the Amerindians and the Maroons - had the highest illiteracy rate, but that was because educational provision had run behind development over the past years. The Alfa '84 programme had tried to reach those groups, but had failed for

lack of funds; it had been unable to penetrate far enough into the interior and to persuade teachers to stay in the neediest areas. The situation was better in Paramaribo.

41. Mr. VREEDZAAM (Suriname) added that the problems with education in the interior were due to the fact that in the past non-Christians had been reluctant to send their children to school in case they lost their identity. That attitude had just begun to change when the fighting had started and the process had been set back. The local people had again accepted that their children would not be forced to take another religion and were sending them to school in greater numbers.

42. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) said that the question of providing education in the mother tongue of most of the population - Sranan Tongo - was under discussion, but the Government had taken no action so far to change its policy of providing teaching in the official language only. Some problems were caused by that policy, but it did not seem to be the main reason for the incidence of drop-outs in primary schools. An NGO had carried out research on the matter and found that a more significant factor was the social and economic conditions of the child's family. She added that the figure of a 40 per cent drop-out rate, quoted by the NGO, was contradicted by the official figures of the Ministry of Education, the reason perhaps being that the NGO had concentrated its research in poor areas.

43. Mr. GRISSA asked, in relation to the fear by people of the interior that they might lose their identity, whether religion was taught in schools or whether children learnt about each of the various religions coexisting in Suriname outside school.

44. Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAN expressed incredulity at the notion that the drop-out rate could be due to social conditions rather than to the use of Dutch in the classroom. Education was free, so social and economic conditions should not be relevant unless there was a question of young people needing to find work.

45. Mr. VREEDZAAM (Suriname) said, in relation to the question of religion in schools, that education had originally been provided by the Moravian church and subsequently by the Catholics, giving rise to fears among the local people that they might be converted. The Government had since introduced education which did not involve religion.

46. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) confirmed that religion was not taught in schools at all. She explained that the Maroons - descendants of runaway slaves - had lacked education and did not know Dutch because they were anxious to protect their identity; for many years only church schools had existed. As for the point raised by Mrs. Bonoan-Dandan, she said that free education did not mean that all could participate on an equal basis; a family's financial circumstances might mean that a child did not have its own room or that it did not have enough food to eat. The NGO which had carried out the research had identified those factors as major ones in the drop-out rate.

47. Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAN said that the Committee regarded the right to education as particularly important, since it was responsible for the formation of the human being. She was not satisfied with the delegation's

reply, although she was grateful for the attempt. She could not believe that social and economic conditions could keep children away from school. She therefore requested that the next report of Suriname should devote particular attention to education and the drop-out rate.

48. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) agreed to that suggestion, adding that unfortunately the Government had done no research into the matter on its own account, but relied on that done by the NGO.

49. Mr. SIMMA reverted to an earlier question on whether the Government regarded the disappearance of national languages in Suriname to be a problem.

50. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) said that there was no question of the many native languages disappearing in Suriname as every group spoke its own language and that Dutch was used only in offices, schools and so forth. Some groups within the country were concerned that the country's second language, Sranan Tongo, might die out and had called on the Government to take action to prevent its disappearance.

51. Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAN asked whether Suriname had a national language.

52. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) said that the national language was Sranan Tongo which almost everyone spoke in Suriname and was comfortable with, but that Dutch was the official language.

53. Mrs. JIMENEZ BUTRAGUEÑO asked whether stories, poetry or books were written in Sranan Tongo.

54. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname) confirmed that books were written in Sranan Tongo; there were also Sranan Tongo-Dutch and Sranan Tongo-English dictionaries, and the Bible had recently been translated into Sranan Tongo.

55. Replying to earlier questions, she said that while most children attended school from the kindergarten level, attendance was not 100 per cent at primary school. She would endeavour to obtain figures in that connection.

56. Mr. ADEKUOYE expressed surprise that Suriname appeared to deny itself the right to develop its own culture, of which language formed an important part. Not to maintain a language was to discriminate against oneself, but to preserve a language through literature and communication was to sustain the dignity of the people. He wondered whether the Government had any policy to reverse that phenomenon.

57. He would have liked more information about Suriname's medium-term and long-term economic and social development plans and any government policy to create employment to transform the economy in the long term. Suriname was strategically placed and should take full advantage of the regional cooperation which was rapidly developing in its part of the world.

58. He would also have liked more information about the informal economy in Suriname. In many developing countries that sector was the most dynamic of the economy but Governments were not usually able to exploit the situation to the advantage of the national budget. Nevertheless, people were encouraged to

engage in the informal economy, the level of unemployment would be cut drastically and the national economy would benefit. Some effort might therefore be made to integrate and dynamize the informal economy in Suriname.

59. Mr. THAPALIA asked whether doctors and engineers enjoyed the right to freedom of association and whether there was any legal provision to support the right to freedom of association as incorporated in the Constitution.

60. Mrs. JIMENEZ BUTRAGUEÑO expressed an interest in any research which might be done on the informal economy and wondered whether there were any children working in that sector. It would be useful to have figures on the number of street children in Suriname's next report. Information on maternity leave, and particularly any government plans to extend maternity leave to all sectors would also be useful.

61. Mr. MARCHAN ROMERO asked whether students were given any help after secondary school to go on to university and whether there were any private universities in Suriname to cater for students unable to enter State faculties.

62. Ms. TAYA asked what percentage of the budget was allocated to the military, educational and social fields.

63. Mrs. POWER-STAPHORST (Suriname), replying to Mr. Adekuoye, said that there was no government policy at present to develop Suriname's culture through the Sranan Tongo language; however since the non-governmental groups were pressing the issue, a policy might develop in the coming years.

64. In general, the Government was planning to diversify the economy, which had until now been very much dependent on the bauxite industry. Plans were being made to attract investment and to arrange a number of joint ventures in gold mining, timber, fishing, tourism and agriculture. The Government was also planning to develop the small enterprise sector and was currently engaged in research on the type of small enterprise that should be developed. The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Trade and Industry were both planning to develop statistics on the informal economy.

65. Replying to Mr. Thapalia, she said that doctors, engineers and all other groups enjoyed full freedom of association: there were two medical associations, one for private doctors and the other for doctors employed by the Government. Engineers were also free to associate as well all other groups, but she had no knowledge of a private association for engineers. So far as she was aware, there were no legal provisions on freedom of association other than those established in the Constitution.

66. Information on maternity leave, on the status of women and children and on the informal sector would be provided in Suriname's next report.

67. There were no private universities in Suriname. A bureau within the Ministry of Education provided scholarships for children who did not have the means to go on to university. Figures on the number of students who benefited from those scholarships could be provided at a later stage.

68. Education accounted for 20 per cent of the national budget in the current year, while in 1992, health had represented 4.1 per cent of the GDP as against 7.3 per cent in 1985. After education, the second largest item on the budget was social affairs. Further information, together with information on military expenditure could be included in the next report.

69. Mr. TEXIER thanked the delegation of Suriname for the efforts it had made to answer the Committee's many questions; he noted its undertaking to reply in greater detail in its next report. The Government was clearly making great efforts to meet the requirements of the Covenant, in view of the number of draft bills, laws and economic measures which were envisaged and the comprehensive social security system which was to be implemented. The plans to establish a minimum wage and to make primary education available to all free of charge were particularly important. The Committee therefore looked forward to hearing more about those measures, once they had been adopted and implemented.

70. The CHAIRPERSON expressed the Committee's appreciation to the delegation of Suriname of its cooperation and clear support for the Covenant. The next phase of the Committee's examination of the report would be the adoption of its concluding observations, which would be made public on the last day of its session and forwarded to the Permanent Mission of Suriname in New York.

The meeting rose at 5.50 p.m.